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Cougar population rebounding after hunting reduced

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The cougar population on Monroe Mountain in south-central Utah has bounced back after state officials reduced the number hunting permits there six years ago.

Cougar researcher Michael Wolfe at **Utah State University** told the Utah Wildlife Board on Thursday that reproductive rates are up and more cougars from that area have also been wandering off.

Those are the kinds of results state wildlife officials had hoped to see.

The trick now will be to set cougar harvest rates to allow a stable population to continue without large boom and bust cycles, said Kevin Bunnell, wildlife program coordinator at the Division of Wildlife Resources.

"I think that's doable," he said.

He's recommending a decrease of about 3 percent in cougar tags this year across the state, or issuing about 475 total.

No one has a firm grasp on how many cougars there are in Utah. Bunnell said he roughly estimates between 1,000 and 3,000. Cougars are stealthy travelers along the landscape. That's part of the challenge enjoyed by hunters but adds to the difficulty for those trying to monitor their progress.

"They're extremely hard to manage because you can't go out and count them," Bunnell said.

Monroe Mountain was for years a popular spot for cougar hunters. In 1997, 40 permits were issued in the area. But wildlife managers, concerned about declining numbers, scaled back the number of permits in 2002, allowing just five or six per year in recent years.

Wolfe and his research crews have placed tracking collars on more than 100 cougars around Monroe Mountain in a study that started in 1995. Data from each of those years provide records about the health of the population and its comeback since the 2002 change.

It also clued researchers in to how far cougars can roam. One wandered more than 800 miles into the mountains of Colorado, Wolfe said.

Not everything is cut and dry though.

Other issues can affect the health of the cougar population, especially human development of its habitat, Wolfe said.

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